David Lynch's Eraserhead: a psychodynamic reading

The initial sequence is full of meanings and contains in a few minutes the fundamental dynamics characterizing the entire film. The movie opens with a close-up of the main character Henry Spencer, whose face is presented in the condition of alienation and discomfort that will accompany him for the entire feature film; Henry's mind is indeed the true protagonist of the story, as well as the place where the story develops and it is not by chance presented in open space, a place in which Henry is naturally alien, uneasy, a condition that we will see perpetuated later. In the background there is a small planet with an irregular surface, this celestial object would actually look like an asteroid destined to crash on the roof of a house: a fatal event that upsets the existence of those involved, as the birth of the child who will "fall" in the life of the protagonist. The presence in the opening scene of a second peculiar character is as singular as it is significant, a disturbing and uncommunicative figure, engaged in triggering a sort of mechanism from which the motor event of the whole affair will arise: Mary's fertilization, the asteroid destined to fall on the path of the protagonists. As a matter of fact in the moment when this deformed puppeteer moves the levers of the mechanism, the spermatozoon released from the mouth of the protagonist will end in a pool, probably the same that Henry distractedly pounded returning home from work shortly thereafter, the fertilization of his girlfriend in which he "stumbled", destined to overturn his daily life.

Henry's small house is presented sleazy, bare, void, embellished only by those that would seem heaps of dirt scattered here and there, some under the radiator, others on furniture; it is good to remember that in the work of David Lynch the immaterial psychological discomfort, exquisitely mental, often ends up being concretized, finding materialization in the scene environment: it is therefore possible to consider the small apartment of the protagonist as a metaphor of his mind, the materialization of his psyche, with all the "dirt" that dwells there. The only pastime in which Henry once indulged is his record player; music becomes the principal means to fill those voids that each of us has in our sense of self, however, the ubiquitous background noise in the home ends up having the upper hand, becoming a noise that inexorably covers the melody, bringing the man from the illusory musical fullness to the real and pervasive sense of emptiness... another asteroid!

Dinner at Mary's home is a new moment of embarrassment and hardship for Henry, where a simple gesture like cutting a dish for dinner becomes a perturbing business, with a very small chicken that still moves and bleeds when touched with flatware. From this moment the story changes its course with the advent of the child of the two protagonists, child who, like the rest of the scene, is absolutely Kafkaesque and deformed, perfect realization of difficulty and malaise. In light of this family reconfiguration Mary will go to live at her boyfriend's house but will not resist much, forced to flee again to her parents, exhausted by the incessant and annoying crying of her child, leaving Henry to handle the situation himself. It is at this moment that a new cinematographic element is presented, destined to become a trademark of the filmmaker, that is the dreamlike component represented in the theater: once again it is the noisy noise of the house that captures the attention of the protagonist and moves him away from reality, transporting him to another mental space, a fictitious but functional dissociative shelter. The central sequence of the film is then opened, in which from the noise of the apartment, or rather the mind, Henry ends up in a little theater where the scene is dominated by a character as particular as uncanny, a girl with an innocent expression, purely happy, expression definitely in contrast with the deformity of her face. This girl represents the personification of the complex of psychodynamic defenses unconsciously used by Henry to escape, even if only illusively, to the hard reality he is experiencing; the show staged by

the girl in fact consists of moving a few steps on the stage, on the notes of "in Heaven everything is fine", footsteps to step on what would seem like small fetuses, remembering also the spermatozoon that at the beginning of the film was mechanically driven to fertilization by the deformed puppeteer. From this dreamlike context takes place the scene that gives meaning to the title of the feature, Henry's head is used to make pencil erasers in a small industry, his mind literally "erases", proof this of the functionality of the dynamic defenses just illustrated; however the elimination process is not perfect, something remains in the eraserhead, and it is precisely the dust produced by the erasure that brings the spectator back to the reality plan, in Henry's apartment, where finally the destiny of the protagonist will be fulfilled. For the first time since the beginning of the film, Henry takes over the affair becoming an active agent of a life that until now has only suffered passively; he decides to open the deformed and sick baby's swaddling clothes with a gesture that we cannot understand if it is love or hatred, a gesture that remains exquisitely ambivalent, like the parent-child relationship itself; from the action of Henry evolves a progression of cascade reactions, where we see the baby suffer another series of mutations and the deformed puppeteer lose control of his now tilting machinery. The last conclusion of this upsurge of events is the possibility for the protagonist to establish contact with the girl from the dreamlike theater, that is with his set of psychodynamic defenses, his mental opium, finally managing to reach her in a heavenly and celestial embrace, albeit merely illusory.

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